

# **A Visit to District Court**

**Teacher  
Resources**



**Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center**

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## **Introduction**

Most court proceedings are open to the public. A visit to district court can be an excellent opportunity for students to learn about what state courts do. District courts are located throughout the state. With proper notice and preparation, district courts often welcome visits by student groups.

The table included in this packet can be used by students of any level and is intended to help them focus on what they observe during proceedings.

## **Grade Level & Curriculum**

Visiting district court applies to Civic Perspective, Democracy in Action (Standard III.3) at the later elementary, middle school, and high school levels.

## Pre-Visit Activities

1. Locate your local district court through the phone book or by visiting the Michigan Courts' trial court directory.
  - In the phone book, the district court will be listed in the government section, likely under county or city government.
  - An online Michigan trial court directory can be found at: <http://courts.michigan.gov/trialcourts/trial.htm>. The Trial Court Directory link will take you to a listing of counties. The county links include the names of judges and court administrators. The Local Trial Court Links lists the web pages of individual trial courts, which typically include the names of judges and administrators. Not all courts have web pages listed.

**Note:** Be sure to contact the court clerk or court administrator several months in advance to arrange a visit. Then, follow up 1–2 weeks before the tour to reconfirm your schedule.
2. If you are not familiar with the layout of the local district court, it is recommended that you visit as an individual during regular business hours to find out about security procedures, space limitations, or other logistical matters that may help you in planning your visit.
3. Familiarize your students with the responsibilities and organization of the Michigan court system. Background materials about district court and links to other resources, including lesson plans, are listed in this packet. Be sure to:
  - Prepare students for what happens specifically in district court.
  - Discuss the difference between civil and criminal cases.
  - Acquaint students with the roles of judges and court staff.

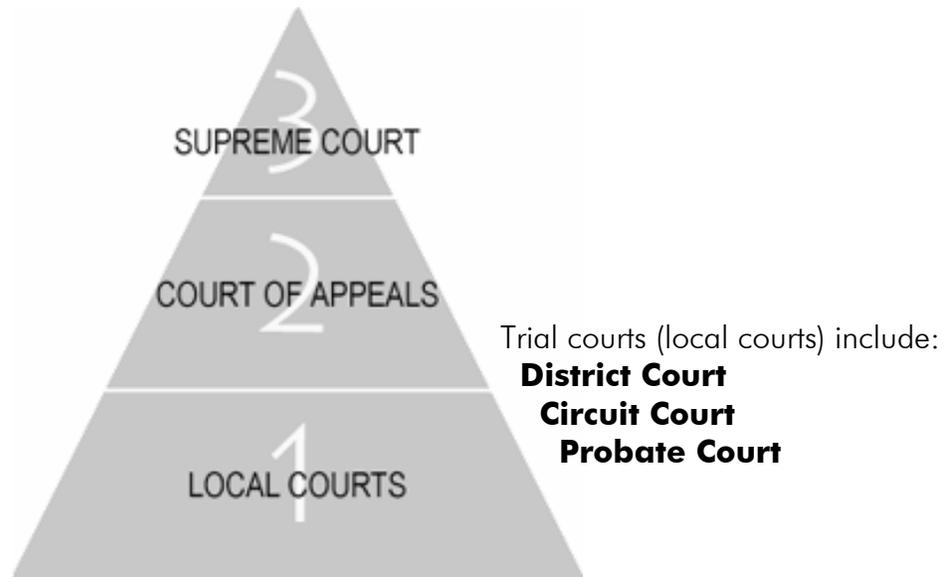
## At District Court

1. Be sure to arrive on time and in the proper location. Remind your students that their presence must not interrupt proceedings since courts strive to be fair to everyone involved. The group must also be prepared to be flexible; dockets can change quickly in a busy court.
2. To help students focus on what they see in the courtroom, have them complete the observation forms provided with this packet. Much of the information can be gathered by watching proceedings. The names of court cases and judges/magistrates are typically posted outside the courtroom.

## **Post-Visit Activities**

1. Discuss what students observed, using the observation forms as a guide. If possible, ask a lawyer to visit the class to discuss the more technical points. Discussion questions might include:
  - What type of hearings did we see?
  - Who was involved?
  - What did they do?
  - Was there anything that surprised you?
  - Was there anything that bothered you?
  - Which core democratic values did we observe being applied?
2. Have students write thank-you notes to the court, describing their observations.
3. Further post-visit activities:
  - Write an essay about how the court resolved an issue. (Later Elementary)
  - Write job descriptions for judges and court staff. (Later Elementary/Middle School)
  - Compare/contrast a criminal case and a civil case. (Middle School)
  - Evaluate the outcomes of specific cases and discuss the effectiveness of the court. (High School)

## Trial Courts



Local courts, also called trial courts, are the types of courts familiar to most people. Almost all cases start here, and the majority of cases are resolved at this level. Trial courts are located in cities around Michigan, and every county is represented by at least three trial courts:

- Probate Court
- District Court
- Circuit Court

In a trial court, lawyers present their cases to judges or jurors, witnesses testify, and evidence is examined. Finally, a verdict is reached based on all the facts.

## What Is District Court?

The district court is often called the people's court. More people have contact with this court than any other court. District courts handle:

- Criminal cases.
- Civil cases, including small claims and landlord-tenant disputes. Civil disputes seeking money damages cannot exceed \$25,000 in district court.
- Most traffic violations.

All criminal cases, for persons 17 years or older, begin in the district court. The district court explains to the defendant the charges, his or her rights, and the possible consequences if convicted of the charge. The court also determines the bail amount and collects bail. (Bail is money paid to the court to release someone from jail in return for promising that they will appear in court.) If the defendant is charged with a misdemeanor that is punishable by not more than one year in jail, the district court will conduct a trial and sentence the defendant if found guilty. In felony cases (generally, cases that are punishable by more than one year in prison) the district court will set the bail amount and hold a preliminary examination to determine if a crime was committed and if there is probable cause to believe the defendant committed the crime. If so, the case is transferred to the circuit court for trial.

There are approximately 100 district courts in Michigan. District court judges are elected for six-year terms.

For more about different types of cases in district court, visit the Michigan Courts Self-Help Center at <http://courts.michigan.gov/scao/selfhelp/selfhelphome.htm>. The link Going to Court, Where to Start will take you to information specific to district court.

## What Might You See at District Court?

Much of what you will see depends upon the day's docket. Courts usually follow a general schedule, and different types of proceedings occur on a regular basis. The court's exact docket is determined close to the date and sometimes changes at the last minute.

District courts are very busy, and you might see the following outside the courtrooms:

- Court staff working at desks and counters.
- Judges and staff in chambers.
- People waiting in line.
- Jail inmates being led by security staff.
- Attorneys and clients meeting in hallways.

Inside the courtroom, many types of hearings occur:

- Arraignments.
- Preliminary examinations.
- Pleas.
- Trials.
- Sentencings.
- Informal hearings.
- Formal hearings.

Hearings may take place in front of a judge or a magistrate.

- A *judge* is an elected official who administers law and makes decisions in civil and criminal proceedings. To be a judge in Michigan, a person must be licensed to practice law in Michigan, have practiced law at least five years, and be less than 70 years of age when elected.
- In Michigan, district court *magistrates* are appointed to assist judges. They can set bail, accept bonds, accept guilty pleas and sentence for traffic violations, and conduct informal hearings on civil infractions.

Depending upon the docket, judges and/or court staff may be willing to meet with students.

## Other Resources

Careers in the Court System, Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center  
<http://courts.michigan.gov/plc/misc/careers.pdf>

Education Resources, Michigan Supreme Court Historical Society  
<http://www.micourthistory.org/education/education.php>

Gallery of Exhibits, Michigan Supreme Court Learning Center  
<http://courts.michigan.gov/lc-gallery/lc-gallery1.htm>

Handbook of Legal Terms, Michigan Judicial Institute  
<http://courts.michigan.gov/mji/resources/holt/holt.htm>

SCoPE (Sample Core Curriculum Plans for Education), Oakland Schools  
<http://www.oakland.k12.mi.us/scope/>

Fourth Grade, Social Studies, Unit 3: Michigan Government  
Lesson 7—How Courts Function to Resolve Conflict  
Lesson 8—District Court Field Trip  
Lesson 9—Mock Trial

Self-Help Center, Michigan State Court Administrative Office  
<http://courts.michigan.gov/scao/selfhelp/selfhelphome.htm>

Trial Court Directory, Michigan State Court Administrative Office  
<http://courts.michigan.gov/trialcourts/trial.htm>

Your Guide to Accessing the Michigan Courts, Michigan Judicial Institute  
<http://www.accessingmicourts.net/>

## A Visit to District Court

Use the table to record what happens in district court. For each case:

- **Write the name of the case.** The case name will always contain two parts. One part is before the “v,” which stands for “versus.” The other part of the name comes after the “v.”
- **Circle the type of case.** In a criminal case, the first part of the name always begins with “People of the State of Michigan.” For example, a criminal case could be named, *People of the State of Michigan v John Smith*. A civil case contains two names, such as *John Smith v Mary Jones* or *John Smith v Jones Company*.
- **Write the type of hearing.** Many different hearings occur in district court. They include:
  - Arraignments.
  - Preliminary examinations.
  - Pleas.
  - Trials.
  - Sentencings.
  - Informal hearings.
  - Formal hearings.
- **Write the name of the judge or magistrate.**
  - A *judge* is an elected official who administers law and makes decisions in civil and criminal proceedings. To be a judge in Michigan, a person must be licensed to practice law in Michigan, have practiced law at least five years, and be less than 70 years of age when elected.
  - In Michigan, district court *magistrates* are appointed to assist judges. They can set bail, accept bonds, accept guilty pleas and sentence for traffic violations, and conduct informal hearings on civil infractions.
- **Write about what happened.** Describe who was involved and what they said.

## A Visit to District Court

Case Name	Case Type	Hearing Type	Judge/Magistrate
v	Criminal Civil		
What happened:			
v	Criminal Civil		
What happened:			
v	Criminal Civil		
What happened:			
v	Criminal Civil		
What happened:			

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_